

**Conference on World Mission and Evangelism**  
***Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship***  
**8-13 March 2018**  
**Arusha, Tanzania**

**Bible Study 4**  
**Equipped Disciples: Embracing the Cross**

***Luke 24:1-12***

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

On 25 June 2015, just days after the massacre of nine people attending Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, S.C., Sister Mary Tutt and I travelled from Allen AME Church in White Plains, N.Y., to the site of this slaughter. We arrived to crowds of people lining the street outside the church, preparing to enter it for a final public viewing of the Hon. Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, one of the victims. Upon arriving in the city of Charleston, we did not delay going to the church; still we reached it just minutes before the doors closed. When we arrived, we found familiar faces and seamlessly joined the line. When we entered the sanctuary of Mother Emanuel, we were told, “No cellphones and no pictures.” This was requested as a matter of respect to the family.

Nine were martyred on 17 June 2015. We viewed the body of one. What did I go to Charleston to see, I wondered, as I passed by Pinckney’s lifeless body, beautifully clad in a robe reflecting his commitment to preaching the good news of Jesus and pastoring people who would follow the way of that good news. What was so important about being present at this vigil that I travelled

with Sister Tutt? Why wasn't it enough to march and organize in White Plains? Why did I feel the visceral need to be inside the TD Arena for his funeral, to mourn with a community of faith that included and far exceeded the AME Church? The answers to these questions elude me. Yet my soul still runs to Charleston; my veins still pump with deep blood calling out to the deep puddles of shed blood; my feet still start to quiver with readiness when I think of June 2015.

## **Womanist Theology**

Womanist theology is an estuary of Black liberation theology and, to an extent, Latin American liberation theology. In many ways, its evolutionary journey parallels and is interwoven with post-colonial theologies. Surely there are ways that womanist theology precedes these theologies, tapping into ancient moral codes, theological principles and constructive ways of being community. However, most significantly, the womanist theology that emerges in the United States is a theo-ethical offspring of the transatlantic slave trade and the Afro-diasporic women shaped in and through that trade and its legacies.

In *Coming Apart* (1979), Alice Walker wrote: "A 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common."<sup>1</sup> Just a few years later, in 1983, Walker would offer an expanded definition of "womanist" in her book of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. In the third part of the definition she offers in that essay, Walker opens the door to boundless possibilities of interdisciplinary engagement. In this part of the definition of "womanist" she writes: "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless."<sup>2</sup> Delores S. Williams was the first to develop Walker's "womanist" in theological studies and to use the term "womanist theology".

While this brief history of womanist theology may seem tangential in a close study of Luke 24:1–12, it is not. Womanist thought and womanist theology pay close attention to dying and to the death of people who are what Katie G. Cannon calls "hyper(in)visible"<sup>3</sup>. This term is used to express the ways that Black women's bodies are extremely visible insofar as they are bodies suitable for oppression, suffering and extermination, but are ignored, erased and non-existent insofar as they are part of a human community suitable to participate in every level of human engagement and discourse. Like the women at the tomb — "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them" — Walker, Williams and Cannon are among those who go to the tombs and the places of death and dying. They not only go to see what has happened following the crucifixion and death of Jesus, ready to recover what can be recovered of his dead body and to honour the body of Jesus upon his death; they also go to see what has happened following the slaughter of countless Black women, Black men, Black children and others swept into spaces of hyper(in)visibility. They (and we who walk in the trail they have blazed) go to the old and forgotten tombs of Rebecca Jackson and Recy Taylor; they (and we who walk in the trail they have blazed) go to the fresh tombs of Anthony Lamar Smith, Sandra Bland, and Kiwi Herring.

The specific handling of liberation, suffering and resurrection in womanist theology as Williams develops it is critically important as we consider Luke 24:1–12. With respect to liberation, Williams refuses to use the exodus as a starting point, despite its thematic fecundity for Black liberation theology. Instead, Williams focuses on the narrative of Hagar as a better descriptive text for liberation in the lives and experiences of Black women. Along with many Indigenous and post-colonial theologians, Williams refuses to fall into the colonizing trap of promoting a flight from slavery. Rather, liberation is expressed in the encounter with the God who sees (Genesis 16:13–14).<sup>4</sup>

Williams also offers an alternative way of thinking about suffering, one that comes from people whose life experiences might well be described in terms of perpetual suffering. With respect to suffering, Williams maintains that “ransom, satisfaction, substitution and moral theories of atonement may not be serviceable for providing an acceptable response to African-American women’s question about redemption and surrogacy.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, she writes that “the womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman’s world to show black women their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus’ life and death.”<sup>6</sup>

For Williams, the perpetual suffering and subjugation of Black and Brown bodies — and especially women of African descent in the United States — demand a theology that interrupts the suffering, not one that converts it from an abstract concept to a real thing. As long as the cross of Jesus is embraced as an expression of Jesus’ surrogacy, for people who have been surrogate sufferers for domestic families, nation states and every category in between, there is no liberation or salvation in the cross of Jesus. Suffering, for Williams, cannot be applauded or affirmed. Thus, we must be careful about how we embrace the cross and what we embrace about the cross.

Williams also provides important insight for the Bible study theme of the day, which connects to the themes of the preceding days. For 12 March 2018, the theme is “Transforming the World: Equipping Disciples”. The theme for 13 March is “Equipped Disciples: Embracing the Cross”. The carryover from one day to the next emphasizes the serviceability, the practicality, the equipment and the capacity of those of us who follow the way of Jesus, equipping disciples and, consequently, being equipped disciples. Fundamental to Williams’s way of handling the matter of suffering, including the suffering of Jesus on the cross, is the question of equipment. Williams writes of equipment in terms of serviceability. She explores the following question: Is the way that we tend to “embrace the cross” — especially when that looks like embracing and affirming suffering — serviceable or usable equipment for disciples of Jesus? Her answer to that question is, No. Consequently, she leads us toward new ways of embracing the cross of Jesus and being equipped as those who would follow the way of Jesus.

Williams offers the following path of embracing the cross. It is one that helps us to read Luke 24. She writes: “The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only

represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it."<sup>7</sup> She goes on to explain: "Thus, to respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil."<sup>8</sup>

To be clear, Williams continues: "The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin. Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross .... Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death."<sup>9</sup> For many of us, this reframing is difficult to accept. A reorientation of this magnitude would be revolutionary. Yet Williams invites us to embrace the "*ministerial* vision" of Jesus, the life of Jesus and the life to which Jesus calls us as disciples. This ministerial vision may lead to and through death, even death on the cross, but the emphasis and the embrace is on the life of righteousness, peace, joy, justice, grace, mercy and healing that we live every day. For this reason, we can affirm the focus on resurrection texts even in the season of Lent. For this reason, we can affirm the cross of Jesus as a painful and unfortunate, though unsurprising, progression of life in and through the wilderness experiences of both Hagar and Jesus. With Williams, we can affirm that embracing the cross means that the women in Luke 24 encounter the emptiness of the tomb at first perplexed, but then on a mission that continues the ministerial vision. This vision often passes through the crosses we must bear and the cross of Jesus, but it is ever focused on life.

### **Key Points about the Text**

There are many points about Luke 24:1–12 that are worth keeping in mind. The fact that the women go to the burial grounds of Jesus on the Sabbath day is one point that we must not overlook. These women, who would have attended to the dead body of Jesus had they found it, echo the life of the one who healed on the Sabbath day (Mark 3:1–6, Luke 13:10–17). Surely it is no mistake that the clothes that would have been used on the body of Jesus, long linen strips, were like bandages. There is a sense in which the very cloth used for the burial rites expressed the hope of the bandage: that death might not be final; that what the cloth covers might be healed, helped or overcome. There is also the fact of the empty tomb. This, ultimately, is the part of the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that cannot, must not and should not change. The emptiness of the tomb may be explained in a variety of ways, but God provides messengers that make sense of this emptiness, this critical moment of trauma and perplexity.<sup>10</sup>

A most important focus for this text is Luke 24:11. In this verse, the Greek word *λερος* (*leros*) is used to express how the words that the women at the tomb carried back to their community were received. The word is used only once in the Christian scriptures and is translated in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as "an idle tale". Many of us might be tempted to believe that it does not matter that women were the ones who found Jesus' empty tomb, that the fact of

their gender identity is inconsequential. However, this is no mistake. We might also be tempted to think that the suggestion that the women's words were idle tales also has nothing to do with their gender. However, those of us who have seen and experienced gender injustice at every level know that a common accusation against women has to do with voice and talk. Women are often accused of gossip and problematic speech. Elsewhere in Christian scriptures, the speech of women is regulated and disciplined (1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:12). Moreover, women have historically been accused of being hysterical. The word and witness of women in legal proceedings and many churches is still questioned today. The fact that women are the first witnesses of the resurrection is, therefore, a powerful interruption of the traditions within and outside of the church.<sup>11</sup>

### **Remember, Return and Tell**

Luke 24:8–9 clarifies the responsibility and mission to which the larger periscope of the 13 March 2018 study calls us. For sure, there are trials, tribulations and challenges in our lives that lead us through many burial grounds. In fact, there will be those who live beyond our earthly days who will walk to and through the burial grounds in which our bodies are laid to rest. In the life of discipleship, following the way of Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves arriving at the burial grounds where we expect to find the body and spirit of Jesus. We will bring our very best spices to those places, ready to honour the (dead) body of the Saviour. We will find that the body of our Saviour has disappeared. This experience will perplex us. We will not be sure how best to proceed. We will accost the messengers of God who try to interpret and translate this experience to us. But it will still be difficult for us. Tradition invites us to do what is customary and what we are accustomed to doing. However, equipped disciples who embrace the cross of Jesus as the unfortunate, but unsurprising, occasion of a life of discipleship must be ready to release tradition in order to receive the resurrection. In order to receive the resurrection, we must be able to remember, return and tell.

We remember the suffering, but more than that, we remember what Jesus said in life before that final suffering. We participate, as the messengers of God did, in reminding one another, remembering to one another, what Jesus said and did in life. When we remember, however, we must not rely on the crutch of our guilt as persecutors of Jesus and followers of Jesus to justify an atonement interpretation of the cross; the remembrance of our own guilt must inspire us to be better followers of Jesus and companions to Jesus on the Jesus journey.

We return to the places and people where and with whom Jesus dwelt during his earthly life. We do not remain in the vicinity of the burial grounds. We make our way to our sources, our places of origin, the centring places where we find ourselves and our people and where God meets, creates and recreates us.

We tell what we have seen and what we have done. We tell that we went to the burial grounds intending to express our custom, but were interrupted by the truth of resurrection. We tell that we met messengers at the tomb. Above all, we tell that the tomb of Jesus was empty. We tell what

the messengers of God have told us. Our chief pieces of discipleship equipment are our memories, our returning and our telling.

- What does *remembering* mean in the scripture from the perspective of your tradition?
- What does *returning* mean in the scripture from the perspective of your tradition?
- What does *telling* mean in the scripture from the perspective of your tradition?

Sister Mary Tutt and I travelled to Charleston as a part of our life of faith together. We travelled as mourners, but also as pastor and congregant, as younger woman and older woman, as one who is learning to live and lead in the age of a movement for Black lives and as one who lived through the end of segregation in the South, migration toward the North and the civil rights movement in the United States.

Together, we *remembered*. We remembered the slaughter that occurred days earlier in Charleston; we remembered the many thousands gone who died in the weeks, days, months, years, decades and centuries before. We remembered, even we couldn't take any photos or use our cellphones. We also remembered Jesus. We remembered that Jesus passed through unjust suffering in life and also on the cross. Sister Tutt and I remembered — even though the Rev. Clementa Pinckney's lifeless body was but a shell in the casket at the front of the sanctuary.

Together, we *returned*. Sister Tutt and I returned to White Plains, N.Y. We returned to our homes; we returned to our feelings. We returned to the unique trials and challenges, gifts and graces of our shared and individual homes. We returned from the dirges to the everyday life and people from whence we came. Like the women at the tomb of Jesus, like the women who think, write and live in the womanist spirit, we did not make the tomb our home.

Together, we *told*. Sister Tutt and I did not have the same story. We did not see exactly the same thing, but we did see many of the same things. Our feelings were not exactly the same about what we saw, but we did carry a story back to the places to which we returned. We told of seeing a church. We told of seeing a body, but that the body was not the man who once lived in and through it. We told of seeing fellow members of the AME Church, family, friends and spectators. We told of seeing a eulogy, one of us seeing from within the arena and one from the screen. We told how the violence and suffering that prompted our travel was senseless. We told of the many who were yet alive and striving to live. We told of a message of "Amazing Grace". We told in ways similar to those of great clouds of witnesses: Mary Magdalene; Joanna; Mary the mother of James; the other women; Peter, who believed; womanist theologians and countless others. We told how, like the tomb of Jesus, the casket, the grave — in truth — was empty. And we yet remember, return and tell the story of resurrection beyond the grave as an embrace of the ministerial vision that, in our experience, leads us through the cross of Jesus.

## Questions

1. What do we believe about suffering and the cross? How might we reorient our beliefs about suffering and the cross?
2. Based on your experience of Jesus and on your daily encounter with various people in your community, what does it mean to you to embrace the cross?
3. How would you live out the good news and the ministerial vision of Jesus in your daily lives? How do you live as a missionary disciple of Jesus?
4. As we return to our communities after the World Mission Conference, what do we remember to tell in ways similar to those of great clouds of witnesses about the hope that the story of the resurrection beyond the grave offers?

## Prayer

*God of life,*

*give us love beyond boundaries;*

*open our eyes to new and deeper meanings of embracing the cross.*

*Lead us to remember, return and retell the story of the resurrection beyond the grave.*

*May we always aim at that life offered by the resurrected Jesus.*

*As transformed and equipped disciples,*

*help us to work to defeat those historical evils represented by the cross.*

*And, moving in the Spirit,*

*may we embrace the ministerial vision to be transformed and to transform discipleship*

*by lives of righteousness, peace, joy, justice, grace, mercy and healing. Amen.*

## About the Author

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker. (2006) Coming Apart. In Layli Phillips (ed.) *The Womanist Reader*. Routledge, New York, p. 7, 11. In a footnote on this sentence she explains: “‘Womanist’ encompasses ‘feminist’ as it is defined in Webster’s, but also means *instinctively* pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women’s culture. It comes (to me) from the word ‘womanish,’ a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: ‘You’re acting *womanish!*’ A labeling that failed, for the most part, to keep us from acting ‘womanish’ whenever we could, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired. An advantage of using

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‘womanist’ is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word ‘Black’ (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word ‘feminist’), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ‘feminist’ with the word ‘white,’ since the word ‘feminist’ is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker. (1983) *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1st ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Cannon. (2007) Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority. In Dwight N. Hopkins and Anthony B. Pinn (eds.) *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 11–30.

<sup>4</sup> Delores S. Williams. (1993) *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., pp. 5-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> William Barclay. 2001 *The Gospel of Luke*, revised and updated edition. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.; Richard Horsley. 1987 *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, 1st ed. Harper & Row, San Francisco; Bruce Malina. 1981 *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. John Knox Press, Atlanta Ga.

<sup>11</sup> This is still true, notwithstanding Pope Francis’s recent affirmation of Mary Magdalene through a Feast Day and the nomenclature of “Apostle to the Apostles”. “Mary Magdalene, ‘Apostle to the Apostles,’ Given Equal Dignity in Feast,” accessed 3 October 2017, <https://aleteia.org/2016/06/10/mary-magdalene-apostle-to-the-apostles-given-equal-dignity-in-feast>.